

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

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News Release



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U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to designate five manatee speed zones in Lee County, Florida

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is announcing a decision to develop an emergency rule to designate five key locations in Lee County, Florida as federal manatee protection areas.

This action is taken because of a recent State Circuit Court ruling, overturning critically important, state-designated manatee conservation zones in Lee County.

The areas affected by this emergency designation are in Matlacha Pass, Estero Bay, southwest side of Pine Island, eastern San Carlos Bay and the mouth of the Caloosahatchee River.

These areas are in the same general vicinity where a manatee was found dead of watercraft inflicted wounds this weekend near Pine Island.

“Manatees are concentrated during this time of the year in the Caloosahatchee River,” said Sam D. Hamilton, Southeast regional director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “As the water temperature warms, manatees will soon be moving down river into these areas in greater numbers.”

The Service considers these areas to be very important for the conservation of manatees in this region of southwest Florida and has been in close contact with the State of Florida throughout the process.

“We have watched as the local government debated the merits of implementing county zones,” said Hamilton. “Regrettably, it does not appear that these solutions will come in time.”

In taking this action, the Service will exercise its authority to establish manatee protection areas as provided for in the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended. The emergency designations for these areas will be in place for up to 120 days from date of publication in the *Federal Register*.

While the emergency designations are in place, the Service will simultaneously propose regulations to make these federal designations permanent. The proposal will allow an opportunity for public comment.

“In the meantime,” said Hamilton, “our hope is that the State zones will be reinstated by the court system and the need for federal action will no longer be necessary.”

Information on the Service’s manatee recovery and conservation efforts is available online at <http://verobeach.fws.gov> and at <http://northflorida.fws.gov>.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is, working with others, to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The South Florida Ecological Field Office is a unit of the Southeast Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, based in Atlanta.